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Beltline interests Pecos alignment foes

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It's an unlikely route, but one that's tantalizing for opponents of the South Mountain Freeway - and, apparently, for some reservation landowners.

Beltline Road is a 12-mile asphalt road that swings south around South Mountain, cutting through the Gila River Indian Reservation and providing a bypass for commercial trucks and cars heading northwest from the Southeast Valley and Tucson, and vice versa.

The road follows the same alignment as Riggs Road in Chandler and 51st Avenue in Laveen.

Instead of bulldozing hundreds of homes in Ahwatukee Foothills, opponents of the "preferred alignment" on Pecos Road argue, freeway planners should widen Beltline Road.

"If the whole idea is to remove the congestion going through downtown Phoenix to another route, then what difference does it make if you move another mile and a half or so south?" said Jim McGrath, an 18-year Ahwatukee Foothills resident who lives near 40th Street and Chandler Boulevard.

"For some reason, they (freeway planners) don't want to touch it. It's like a sacred cow."

The governing council of the Gila River Indian Community passed a resolution in 2001 forbidding freeway planners from even studying the possibility of building the freeway on tribal land.

Critics wonder how permanent that decision is, whether the resolution could be rescinded and whether individual landowners on the reservation still could work out a deal with the Arizona Department of Transportation.

"The Beltline has been a reoccurring suggestion by the people in Ahwatukee," ADOT spokesman Matt Burdick said. "The answer is that the (Indian) community doesn't support it, and any Indian community alignment that's considered, we'd need the support of the governing council."

For its part, the council is mum publicly on whether any alignment through the reservation would be considered. Phone calls made over several months seeking comment from Greg Mendoza, the tribal council's chief of staff, have not been returned.

Nathaniel Percharo, 71, a tribal member who lives west of Beltline as it turns north in Komatke, said he thinks it's unfair the council is acting on behalf of landowners, who may want to negotiate with ADOT for a freeway on their land.

"They passed that resolution with less than a dozen members," he said. "What we're saying is as landowners you're depriving us of having a say in what to do with our land."

The proposed South Mountain Freeway is envisioned as a 22-mile stretch that completes the 202 loop around the Valley. The \$1.7 billion leg is tentatively planned to connect to I-10 along Pecos Road and swing west around South Mountain to link to 55th Avenue.

If ADOT, federal highway officials and the Maricopa Association of Governments proceed with plans to build the freeway, construction funding would be available in 2009 through 2015.

As proposed, the freeway would mean demolishing about 250 homes in Ahwatukee Foothills if it were built at ground level and about double that if built below ground level.

Percharo, a silversmith, has been involved in the freeway issue since talk began in the late 1980s of building a toll road around the mountain, a proposal that died.

"There will never be a solution to this problem," he said, standing outside his home as trucks roared past.

Beltline Road is maintained by the Maricopa County Department of Transportation. Nearly 9,000 vehicles on average each day rumble over the road, spokesman Roger Ball said. That's up from 7,800 vehicles on average a year ago.

When Percharo and his wife, Lisa, moved to the area 15 years ago, a car or truck would pass by every 20 minutes. These days, a steady stream of cars zoom by, especially during rush hour.

"It's like this all day long," he said, raising his voice to be heard over the din of semitractor-trailer rigs.

Percaro said he wants the freeway to run about one-quarter mile south of Pecos Road on the tribal land owned by members of the tribe. He owns 30 acres on the reservation, including 10 acres south of Pecos Road. The land is undeveloped.

Although he favors locating the freeway south of Pecos, that option would require approval of the governing council and ultimately, the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Percharo said he has raised the issue of building the freeway on the reservation with other landowners but members of the tribal council have rejected the idea.

Percharo said he believes the tribe is losing out on a "golden opportunity" by not considering the freeway on its land.

"It seems like wherever the federal government puts you (tribes), it's a gold mine. Either they (tribes) find minerals or they (freeway planners) want to build a road," he said.

"Indian people are really blessed."

He said the Gila River Indian Community now finds itself in the same situation as the Salt River-Pima Indian Community, which negotiated a deal with freeway planners after years of saying it didn't want the 101 Pima Freeway on its land.

"Look at some of those people in Salt River," he said. "They're millionaires."

In addition to individual wealth, the freeway would create economic development opportunities for the tribe.

"This whole reservation doesn't know a thing about economic development," he said. "If you're going to get into economic development, you need to bring people to the reservation."

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